Traces of Trauma: Loss and Longing in *Too Many Men*

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Over the last thirty years the Holocaust has come to be seen as a defining moment of rupture in Western history, culture and philosophy. More particularly, the Shoah (the Jewish catastrophe) has come to represent a pivotal moment in Jewish history. Sander Gilman argues that in the 1990s the centre of Jewish "Diaspora" history moved from "Jerusalem" to the "Holocaust", making "all of the rest of Jewish history into a new periphery" (3). This new understanding of the centre makes it increasingly necessary to reconsider Jewish history metaphorically or teleologically. Just as the Shoah has become central to, and centred in, Jewish history, so too Jewish identity which has always been invested in a history of persecution, suffering and survival, has been re-centred on this story of suffering and survival through a contemporary focus on the Shoah. Not only has the Shoah affected the identity of those who survived, and those from the surviving generation, but it has also greatly influenced how the children of that surviving generation, and those who have come after the Holocaust, understand and live their "Jewishness".

While the generation that has come after the Holocaust has been actively involved in preserving memory for some time, the weight of this responsibility increases as the last survivors begin to die. However, the responsibility of bearing witness in Jewish history has never been confined to those who were present at the historical moment of witness, but also passed on to those who have come "after". Scriptural sanction "emphasizes the centrality of witness-bearing to living the covenant of Judaism" so that, for the generation born after the Holocaust, bearing witness is a moral and theological obligation (Berger 253-54). However, for the many Jewish people estranged from Judaism, remembering the Holocaust is less about a religious obligation, than part of other political, moral and familial obligations. While one may have expected the passing of years to have eroded Holocaust memory, the opposite seems to have occurred. Indeed, many Jewish scholars argue that the second generation appears more impelled than the Holocaust generation to seek meaning and understanding (Sicher 26-27).

Lily Brett, a child of two Holocaust survivors, is one of the many Jewish artists of her generation who look to the experiences of her parents for meaning and identity. Like others of her generation, she has come to endure what Ellen Fine calls "the psychic imprint of the trauma" (186). This generation "remembers" an event never lived through, feeling obliged to accept the burden of collective memory (187). In contrast to transmitted memory, a different form of memory manifests itself—what Henri Raczymow calls "absent memory". This lack of memory, or non-memory, arises from a feeling of exclusion both from the experience and from knowledge about the experience. Fine suggests that while the second generation felt a "collective consciousness" of the Holocaust, their limited knowledge of its details meant that they "invented fantasies and myths to fill in the blanks of the stories. In effect, they had to fashion their own version of the memory bequeathed to them" (191). This "fashioning of memory" through writing by the second generation has provided a space for the exploration of Jewish identity, post Holocaust. However, these aesthetic representations are often anchored in "research rather than in memory, as they trace a trauma both remembered and not remembered, transmitted and not transmitted" (Horowitz 278).

In Australia, as in other Jewish Diaspora, the number of published written representations of the Holocaust by children of survivors increased in the past two decades. Books such as Mark Baker's *The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey through Memory* (1997), Anna Rosner Blay's *Sister Sister* (1998), Ramona Koval's *Samovar* (1996), Susan Varga's *Heddy and Me* (1994) and Rose Zwi's *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park* (1997) all explore the issue of inter-generational trauma and the Holocaust. As well, recent anthologies of Jewish writing in Australia have focused in part on the effects of the Holocaust on children of survivors, notably *Enough Already: An Anthology of Australian Jewish Writing* (1999) and most recently *New Under the Sun: Australian Jews on Faith, Politics and Culture* (2006). *Children of the Shadows: Voices of the Second Generation*, edited by Kathy Grinblat (2002) constitutes an entire collection dedicated to the writing of the "second generation" experience in Australia.

With a much wider international readership than any of her Australian contemporaries, expatriate Australian author Lily Brett is one of the most prolific second generation Holocaust writers in the world. Many of her books have received awards and are now being translated into a number of languages, including German. Born in 1946 in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Germany, Brett migrated to Australia in 1948 with her Polish Jewish parents, both survivors of Nazi concentration camps including Auschwitz-Birkenau. She grew up in Melbourne and published her first collection of

poetry *The Auschwitz Poems* in 1986. She has since published five collections of poetry, two collections of short stories, three novels, one collection of short journalistic essays and two collections of autobiographical essays.¹

In both her autobiographical writing and interviews, as well as in her fiction and poetry, Brett describes what it is like to live in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Her writing challenges the notion that the suffering born of the Holocaust is over; her work addresses the continuing effects of an event so profound in its influence that the horror of the past continues to be lived in the present. In this way, her work exemplifies the struggle with "absent memory" and "scar without the wound" that Jewish scholars see as the burden of her generation (Sicher 26). No book demonstrates this concern better than Brett's second novel *Too Many Men*. Indeed *Too Many Men* represents a culmination of the concerns of her work—the legacies of the Holocaust; the concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau; intergenerational trauma; and continuing anti-Semitism.

Too Many Men is a "big book"—a 700-page journey through the Polish landscape. Ruth Rothwax, an Australian-born Jew and successful businesswoman living in New York, travels through Poland with her father Edek, a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor from Melbourne. Also accompanying Ruth is a ghost—the dead Nazi Rudolph Hoss—who appears as a voice only, and only to Ruth. Hoss contacts Ruth in Poland and leaves her through his re-death before she leaves. Ruth's father is unaware of his daughter's dialogue with a ghost, it is Ruth that must fight these demons. Ruth initiates a journey with her father to revisit their family history, the places of former family life and the places of incarceration and familial destruction. While Ruth and Edek share this journey, it represents quite different things for each of them, and the meanings of the journey change as the two are flung into a contemporary Poland that has little regard for their previous suffering or for the contemporary suffering born from Poland's particular response to the Holocaust. This is not Brett's first encounter with the theme of the return to Poland. As early as 1987 she published a collection of poetry entitled *Poland: and other poems*, which recounts her journey back to Poland to retrace her mother's history. Brett has also written about her experiences in Poland in an autobiographical essay in Between Mexico and Poland (2002).

As in all her work, Brett brings the Holocaust, a past event, into the contemporary landscape of the narrative present. In this way the writing itself becomes a form of memorialising. However, memorialising, either through a book or a museum, is a substitute for another type of loss beyond that caused

by the event itself. The less we experience memory from what Nora calls "the inside", the less it is an organic ritual, the more it exists through its "exterior scaffolding and outward signs" (Nora 13). The fact that we are, in Western societies, so dedicated to recording "memory", and especially in regard to the Holocaust, is evidence of what Nora terms a "veneration of the trace" that is evidence of the loss of "real" memory (13). It is this veneration of the trace that becomes both the character Ruth Rothwax's obsession and indeed the author's obsession. All of Brett's writing is an attempt to delay "forgetting" and to invigorate collective memory.

In *Too Many Men* Ruth Rothwax (the daughter of two Holocaust survivors) is compelled beyond simulation to an experience with the "real" that takes her over and over again to Poland:

Her first trip to Poland was just to see that her mother and father came from somewhere. To see their past as more than an abstract stretch of horror . . . The second time was an attempt to be less overwhelmed than she was the first time. To try and not cry all day and night . . . Now, she was here to stand on this piece of earth with her father. (6)

However, for Edek, visiting Poland is a journey to a traumatic past, and one best left to rest. It is only for the sake of his daughter that he agrees to this trip for he cannot see the necessity in it: "What do you want to go to Poland for?' he had said. 'There is nothing there. Everyone is dead. There is nothing to see" (6). Edek's memories of his family travelled with him to Australia, his new home and a safe-haven for his memories.

Brett explores the inter-relationship of memory, place and trauma through the characterisation of a survivor and a survivor's child. When walking around his former home of Lodz, approximately half a century after his forced expulsion, Edek is quite startled by the change apparent in the city he once loved. The absence of Jews and Jewish culture has transformed the landscape of the site of Edek's youth and he tells Ruth:

"Piotrkowska Street used to be full of people on Saturday night," . . . "People walking up and down. It was such an excitement in the feeling of the street. Young boys and girls walked together. Couples walked together. Everybody was talking. Everybody was happy. Look outside now. No one is there. There is nobody." (139)

Ruth does not share this sense of loss. When she enters Lodz for the third time she contemplates:

Lodz looked as bleak and as grim as Ruth remembered it. They were in the centre of the city. In the streets people had pallid faces and blank expressions. Lodz, an industrial city built on the textile industry, was

often called the Manchester of Poland. Lodz, Ruth thought, made Manchester look like Monte Carlo. (131)

The humour, so pivotal to the identity and experiences of the characters in the novel, is again typical in Brett's oeuvre. The fatalistic Jewish sense of humour and a fine appreciation of the absurdities of everyday life invest this novel with a scepticism regarding its own subject matter. Ruth, a woman who writes letters on other people's behalf is intimately invested in, and indeed profits from, simulation. However, when confronted with the simulation of the Holocaust apparent in the contemporary Polish landscape, Ruth is appalled. Her father, on the other hand, as a survivor of the event that has caused his daughter trauma, knows that no memorialising can do justice to the Jewish catastrophe which he was caught up in. Brett ironically contrasts the attitudes of these two characters using Edek to question his daughter's anger and anxiety. While he is able to establish friendly relations with the Polish people he encounters, his daughter simulates the anger she thinks should be his own. While Ruth lives her life in the shadow of the Holocaust, Edek displays a survivor's rejection of the victim role that his daughter has invested with such significance.

This is perhaps best illustrated after a traumatic visit to Auschwitz, Edek's first return since his incarceration. Exhausted from the emotional weight of this event, Ruth is appalled to discover that it is this very night her eighty-oneyear-old father has vigorous sex with a local Polish woman in their hotel! This contrast between the survivor's knowledge of the effects of the passage of time and the survivor's child's need to continually reinvest the present with the traumatic past is played out constantly throughout the novel. The anxiety of being a child of survivors manifests itself through Ruth's obsession with health. She must jog every day; she obsessively controls her diet and she is constantly aware of her weight and shape. However, this complicated character is also aware that this is all an attempt to control what cannot be controlled—the historical forces that led to her father's suffering. Nor can her diet of fresh fruit and "bird seeds" (Edek's description) reduce the anxiety she feels at "bearing the scar without the wound". When she attempts to control her father's health and diet, Ruth comes up against a force (for life) bigger than her own. While the author does present Edek as a pained Holocaust survivor sadly dislocated in a once familiar landscape, she also gives him an enthusiasm for life and a tolerance toward others that is not part of his daughter's character.

Edek's memory of his home city is complicated when he tries to navigate his way around the once familiar landscape. When looking for his former family apartments in Lodz, Edek becomes frustrated that he can no longer rely on his mental map of the city as the landscape has altered. As Edek says

in exasperation: "The streets are not where they should be" (304). Edek's frustration is born from a sense of dislocation, from no longer being a part of the geography of his youth. This positions him as an outsider, and a tourist, not only because the familiar geography has changed with time, but also because Edek is now culturally "outside". He does, however, manage to locate the site of his family's apartments. This site is obviously of great significance to Ruth:

The footpath outside twenty-three Kamedulska Street was strewn with old newspapers and other debris. This mess upset Ruth. She wanted to clean it up. She didn't want litter around this building. She suddenly understood why people tended and cleaned graves. Why they tidied up around tombstones and monuments. But this wasn't a grave. Twenty-three Kamedulska Street wasn't a shrine. It was just a site of a former life. It wasn't a mausoleum . . . (252-53)

This site, for Ruth, is a metonym for the Jewish heritage that has been lost. The apartment building stands in for all that is gone, and itself becomes a memorial site. In wanting to clean the building's facade our heroine is, metaphorically speaking, wanting to clean the history of horror that infects present day Poland. In this sense, Ruth wants to purify a past that is tainted—she wants to clean Poland. By preserving a site, Ruth desires to preserve a memory. Her father offers a more practical response:

"Why can't they keep this place clean?" Ruth said to Edek.

"What for?" he said. "For us? It could be the cleanest street and the cleanest building in all of Poland and it would not make any difference to us."

"They should clean it out of a respect for the memory of those people whose lives they moved into," Ruth said.

"It is too late for respect," Edek said. (253-54)

For Edek, the damage has been done and no symbolic gesture can repair or reconcile the devastation of the destruction of his family and former life. Symbolism falls flat against this degree of loss. Brett's text, though fictional, reminds us that memorialisation is a consequence of a loss of living memory, and perhaps is also undermined by the real suffering of the survivors.

Apart from the site of Edek's former home, the sites that do remain to confirm Jewish existence in Lodz (and Poland more generally) are sites of contestation with ambiguous purposes. One of these sites that our travellers visit is the Jewish centre in Lodz, a centre dedicated to the rehabilitation of Jewish life in Poland. While the director of the Jewish Centre tells Ruth that: "It is very important that Jewish people have a home in Poland,' . . . 'We have to build up Jewish life in Poland, once more'" Ruth questions this aim:

"'Poland is not a conducive place for Jews. Why would you want Jews to live here? Poles don't like Jews'" (313). Despite the relative absence of Jews in Poland, there are accounts of continuing anti-Semitism (Cooper 224). Too Many Men depicts this "anti-Semitism without Jews" through Ruth's and Edek's encounters with both Polish people and their industry. In Krakow, Ruth and Edek are confronted by a city firmly entrenched in the tourism industry. At the market in the town square of Krakow, Ruth is shocked to see for sale carvings of faux Jews-Orthodox Jews in long black coats and broad hats with the white tfillin with long beards and long hooked noses, and musicians in black jackets and bowler hats looking downcast. Ruth is outraged: "Poland got rid of its Jews, and had now turned them into knickknacks . . . Bric-a-brac. Fodder for the tourism industry" (467). This outrage at the commercialisation of the "other" is not shared by Ruth's father: "next to the pogroms and beatings and stone throwings of Polish life that Edek and his family had been accustomed to, these figurines seemed harmless" (467-68).

The most compelling and unsettling act of anti-Semitism is the more personal encounter with the old Polish couple occupying Edek's former home. The episodes at the Lodz apartment where Ruth finally recovers part of her family heritage present a sly, greedy, manipulative and pathetically tragic figure of two Polish people still living with the effects of the Holocaust. The audacity of the Polish couple, who have stored Edek's family's goods and clearly profited from the expulsion of the Jews, is slowly revealed in the narrative. It is this personal, face-to-face encounter with anti-Semitism that unites both Ruth and Edek in their contempt. While Edek could divorce himself from the representational violence of the figurines he cannot help but be disturbed by the way these people have profited from his family's suffering—"those bestids" (396).

As unsettling as these scenes between Edek, Ruth and the old Polish couple may be, Brett's depiction of Polish people in general is also unsettling. While the Polish couple in particular represent the abject, most of the other minor Polish characters are presented as grotesque, sly, greedy, anti-Semitic, lecherous and violent (the only exception being Tadeuz, a young university student personally unaffected by the Holocaust). While Brett's novel confronts continuing anti-Semitism in contemporary Poland, it also contributes to long-standing negative stereotypes of the Polish people. Given these stereotypes included the Jewish Poles, it is impossible to ignore the irony here. Despite her disdain for contemporary Polish culture, Ruth, like many Jews from the new world, attempts to understand and locate her "Jewishness" through her returns

to Poland. Kugelmass shares Brett's ironic view of this activity: "How ironic it is that Poland, relegated to the past by American Jews, has suddenly emerged as a stage upon which they act out their future" (415).

While at the Jewish Centre in Lodz, Ruth discusses the so-called restoration of Jewish life with the director. The director proudly tells Ruth of the money that is being donated to restore Jewish synagogues in Poland. Ruth is far more sceptical regarding the purpose of these restorations:

The synagogues stood there. Alone and unattended except for a handful of mostly elderly people, in some of the larger cities. And a stray tourist or two. Some of the synagogues were in poor villages and towns . . . In the middle of rural and urban poverty, the newly renovated synagogues stood out. It was a misrepresentation of a Jewish community . . . A misrepresentation that played to the rich Jewish stereotype . . . A community of twelve Jews shouldn't be associated with the most expensively renovated building in the village or town . . . (315-16)

Brett once again questions the purpose of memorialising and restoration, this time suggesting through the narrative perspective of Ruth, that it may not only do little justice to the real suffering of the victims but it may also increase anti-Semitism. In this respect, the memorial becomes the site for anti-Semitism without Jews, a simulacrum that replaces a missing people. While Ruth is sceptical about the good that can come from restoring synagogues in a landscape largely devoid of Jews, she is interested in the trace of the synagogues, the absences that mark a former presence:

The map published by the Our Roots company that she had of Jewish Lodz before the war, was marked with synagogues. Underneath each synagogue were, in brackets, the words 'non existing.' So the places she wanted to walk by were sites. Former sites of synagogues . . . She wanted to visit the 'non existing' synagogues . . . (321)

Pragmatic Edek finds his daughter's obsession with things that are gone quite baffling and confronts Ruth: "You want to walk to something that is not there?' . . . 'Are you crazy?'" (321).

"You do not go to a synagogue what is there," he said. "You do not go to the synagogues what are in New York, you do not go to the synagogues what are in Melbourne. Why do you go to a synagogue what is not there?"

Edek had a point, Ruth thought. She was never interested in synagogues. She avoided them. Why was she so drawn to these synagogues? To these absent synagogues.

"I don't know why I want to go, Dad," she said. "I just want to feel the air, there. To stand and listen."

"To what?" Edek said.

"To nothing, to my thoughts," Ruth said.

"You can listen to your thoughts in a synagogue in New York, or in Melbourne," Edek said. "Or you can listen to your thoughts in the hotel room, in Lodz." (322)

Ruth considers Edek's comments and realises that she is indeed not interested in the Jews in New York or Melbourne, but only the Jews in Poland—the dead Jews. The exchange ends with Edek's humorous brashness, but equally eloquent perception: "You do not like so much the Jews what are alive,' Edek said" (322). Through Edek's pragmatic narrative perspective Brett explores the ambivalence at the heart of this novel: the need to recognise and somehow respectfully remember the past when the living memories are lost; and the need to acknowledge the continuing effects of this history in the real environs of the contemporary landscape.

While Ruth feels a sense of identity through association with the dead Jews of Lodz, she defines this identity in opposition to the living Poles. Ruth dissociates Jews from the "other" Poles, the Aryan (mostly Catholic) people. "The beauty of the cemetery was amplified, Ruth thought, by the contrast with the squalor and decay of what remained of the formerly Jewish homes in Lodz. And the bigotry and ignorance and indifference of the Poles" (346). The Jewish Poland of the past calms Ruth, and the non-Jewish Poland of the present causes her anxiety, in sharp contrast to her father who develops both friendships and sexual relationships with Polish people. Unlike his daughter, Edek identifies as Polish, a situation his daughter finds hard to recognise, and another clever irony in this novel. After leaving the Jewish cemetery, Ruth informs her father that the itinerary she has produced includes a visit to the Lodz ghetto, before leaving for Krakow (and Auschwitz). Edek asks Ruth why it is necessary to go the ghetto stating: "'There is nothing there'" and "'We are visiting one nothing after the other'" (349).

While Ruth feels compelled to return to Poland to understand/produce her sense of place, it is a return to the past, the dead, or in Edek's understanding a return to "nothing". Ruth does not have to battle, as Edek does, with the changes in the Polish landscape that negate his memories. Ruth's battle is with other people's memories of other people's lives. Ruth, the child of a survivor, mourns for a lost culture that was not her own, but her stolen heritage, now only accessible to her through the trace. This is a legacy of genocide for those who come after the event. Different histories will operate in the same geographic space—when people are removed from the real environs of living culture they are more susceptible to the lure of the trace.

Objects, not only absence, take the form of the trace. As previously mentioned, while in Lodz Edek and Ruth return to Edek's former home and after an initial discovery, and later monetary transaction, they recover stolen family heritage in the form of china, silver and clothing. These material objects also represent the trace of Ruth's dead family, and these objects become a fetish for her:

She wanted the china and the silver bowl. She wanted them badly. She wanted to touch them. To hug them. To hold them to her. She knew they were only inert objects, but they had been held and touched by all the people that she would never be able to hold and touch. (272)

The objects that have been touched by Ruth's grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are the only substitutes Ruth has for lost physical intimacy with them. In the absence of their living skin, the object becomes the point of contact between Ruth and her family.

While Ruth will use the china and silver when she returns to New York, it is her grandfather's coat that will touch her most intimately. This coat retains the imprint of her grandfather, and will provide a barrier between Ruth and the cold world. In *Too Many Men*, the granddaughter seeks a connection with the grandfather through a piece of cloth, the metonymic evidence that he once was real. In wearing the coat the character Ruth will wear, on her skin, the trace of the absent family. Ruth's search for her familial identity becomes invested in these objects that have been touched and worn by her family. It is the coat, the silver and the china that Ruth can transfer back to New York. The absent family from Poland can now be carried with Ruth through the objects that will preserve their memory. However, as Edek well knows, objects cannot replace the real loss of family; they are a poor substitute, but the only substitute Ruth has. Ruth leaves with these material objects which now relieve the need for Poland. The objects will aid in the metonymic memory work as the country and its inhabitants cannot. In this way, Ruth can avoid the future reality of living memory in Poland and instead shape her own version through the trace.

The inability to deal with the landscape of memory in contemporary Poland is made even more apparent through Ruth's continuing encounters with the dead Nazi, Hoss. These encounters form a significant part of the novel, despite being its most unconvincing element. Ruth's communication with the ghost or dybbuk Hoss provides an outlet for Ruth's own angst—after all, he has no choice but to connect with her, unlike the Polish people she offends. Ironically she is more willing to have meaningful dialogue with this dead Nazi that she can hear, than the Polish population that is still uneasy about

admitting the Shoah. While Hoss is represented as both comically pathetic and frighteningly ordinary, he is not presented as grotesque as many of the Polish characters are. The dead Nazi can not harm anymore, negotiating the simulation of Hoss is easier than the reality of dealing with people that have suffered and enabled suffering. Real relations continue to provide pain and anger, memorials, the trace and ghosts can console. In this way the author explores the limitations of her own craft—the book as memorial, critiquing the limitations of memorial.

While both Ruth and Edek mourn the loss of family in different ways in the narrative, they are both fiercely dedicated to their remaining family—each other. Despite the different experiences these two characters are given in the novel, and despite the ironic humour that arises from their different perspectives, this is a journey undertaken for love. Edek is well aware of the legacy he has passed to his daughter and he is saddened and humbled by this. On her part, Ruth knows her father wishes it were otherwise. Edek makes the journey back to Poland because he loves his daughter, and Ruth initiates the journey with her father to try and get closer to his pain. Despite her frustration with Edek at times, Ruth is extremely proud of him and her support is unwavering. Likewise, Edek may not always understand his daughter, but his respect for her does not diminish. This is a relationship that mirrors the author's own relationship with her father, represented in her autobiographical writing. This relationship between the survivor and his child drives the narrative, and the need to represent this difficult, but profound love, also drives the author. Lily Brett has produced both an ironic and a sensitive response to the burden of her generation and this should assure Too Many Men a place in the canon of Holocaust representation.

Notes

Poland: and other poems (1987), After the War (1990), Things Could Be Worse (1990), What God Wants (1991), Unintended Consequences (1992), In her Strapless Dresses (1994), Just Like That (1994), Mud In My Tears (1997), In Full View (1997), Too Many Men (1999), New York (2001), Between Mexico and Poland (2002) and You Gotta Have Balls (2005).

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